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UNCLAS BAGHDAD 002404

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: IRAQ: Iraqi Airways Inaugural Flight to Basra.

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1. (SBU) Iraqi Airways (IA), with assistance from the British Royal Air Force at Basrah Airport in Southern Iraq, conducted a test flight of their B727 passenger aircraft on May 31, 2005 from Baghdad International Airport (BIAP). This was followed up by the first passenger flight from Baghdad to Basrah, which returned on Saturday June 4, 2005. On board the inaugural flight was the Minister of Transportation, Mr. Salam Al-Maliki, along with 42 passengers. The news media carried the event. This is considered the first domestic flight by an Iraqi airline since Saddam Hussein was in power.

2. (SBU) Due to lack of infrastructure, financial and legal reasons, Iraqi Air is the product of a "wet lease" agreement between Iraqi Airways, Ministry of Transportation's State-Owned Enterprise (SOE) and an aviation company in Amman, Jordan. All IA flights originate in Amman. This flight is the first commercial charter connection to the Southern Iraqi city of Basrah, Iraq's second largest by population. According to press reports, IA will service Basrah three or four times a week. IRMO Transportation representatives continue to work closely with the Iraqi Civil Aviation Authority (ICAA) to ensure IA is following all the necessary security and flight request procedures for this route.

3. (SBU) Reports indicate IA will begin flights to Erbil Airport in Northern Iraq under the same arrangements from Amman, Jordan. Erbil has recently been approved by the ICAA for limited charter operations authorized under the Aeronautical Information Publication (AIP). Construction of Sulemaniyah airport is not yet completed. Post continues to work closely with Iraqi civil aviation authorities and IA representatives on these and other issues. Minister of Transportation Salam Auda Al-Maliki has listed the opening of Iraq's airports among his top priorities (septel.)

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